

Circle of Life: Organic Farming in Mexico



Organic farmer Ezequiel Macias leading a workshop in his fields for visitors from the city. (Photo courtesy of Danielle Schami)

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Every two weeks in Guadalajara, in Jalisco State, Mexico, perhaps half a dozen farm producers sell organic foods and household cleaners at a tiny community market, in a friendly participant's yard.

The market is really peddling ideas, according to Danielle Schami, producer and director of a 30 minute English/Spanish documentary video, *Full Circle: From Rural Fields to Urban Tables*.

"It's not primarily about buying and selling. It's really about raising awareness and educating people about where they fit into the food system," she says. "By choosing to buy organic or choosing to buy local, they are in effect deciding to stay out of a global food system... it's starting with food to understand how we fit into a global economic system."

The market, *El Círculo de producción y consumo responsable* [Circle of responsible production and consumption] is a community project of the 15-year-old Jalisco Ecological Collective. The Círculo is based on old Mexico's *tianguis*, indigenous marketplaces where people exchanged food and ideas. It's a way to create a direct link between farmers who produce organic vegetables, milk, meat, and eggs, and their buyers. The market is founded on the principals of fair trade, ecologically sound agriculture, and responsible consumption.

Widening a small circle

When Schami shot the video in 2002, the market had about 40 regular buyers, and perhaps 100 more people directly involved in the Círculo's education programs. The education program's showpiece is a booklet written by local *campesino*, Ezequiel Macias, explaining why he began promoting organic farming alternatives, and using them on his own farm. Schami says the Círculo's ultimate reach probably runs into the hundreds, through workshops, bimonthly newsletters, videos, local university co-op studies, a radio program, and farm tours. The *tianguis* includes a sign-up table for people interested in further involvement in the Círculo.

Schami is a neophyte videographer. Her expertise is in alternative food systems planning and education, and the video was done for her Masters thesis for York University's environmental studies programme. In 2001, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) supported her work with an AGROPOLIS international graduate research award for urban agriculture research.

The risk of farming without pesticides

Schami believes small-scale farmers in Mexico and elsewhere are victims of an industrial farming system that values uniformity over diversity, and environmentally suspect inputs and short-term profits over land stewardship and long-term sustainability. Farmers in the *Círculo* take a financial risk, because state subsidies and incentives are unavailable to producers who don't use chemical inputs.

The farmers had realized, though, that the fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides they needed to grow commodities for big food processors buyers were sickening their families, and the surrounding environment. Old staple corn varieties were falling by the wayside in favour of standardized hybrids.

For *Círculo* consumers, the taste and quality of pre-packaged tortilla mixes were issues. So was nutrition. The limestone used to process old-style tortilla corn is an important calcium supplement, missing in the new mixes. Both buyers and producers sought something better.

Aiming for the mainstream

Educating more mainstream Mexican consumers about advantages of responsible consumption and production may be a long process. Tortillas from heritage corn varieties taste better, but buyers wonder why the ingredients take more work, yet cost more, than the bags of mix they've bought in chain groceries for two or three decades.

While the circle is small so far, Schami says members have worked on it for years, and are willing to work years more. They're always refining their ideas using bridges with organizations in Brazil, Germany, Scandinavia, and Canada. She thinks the *Círculo*'s long-term success depends on its ability to work increasingly with other institutions in Mexico, especially governments, without becoming co-opted. From there she believes its ideas could become mainstream.

Schami sees her video as her contribution to the education process, targeting any community group anywhere that will watch it.

"I really want the story to get out there," she says. She adds that so often information flows from North to South, but this is a case where, "we [in the North] have a lot to learn."

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